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# Imagined Races: From Environmental Determinism to Geographical Authenticity in Twentieth-Century Argentina

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This article explores how Argentine intellectuals incorporated the natural environment into their accounts of the racial, cultural and political features of the nation. In the late nineteenth century environmental determinism, based on the assumption of a cause-effect relationship between geographical and racial factors, entered Argentina through three main routes: Lamarckism, Darwinism and Spencerianism. By the mid twentieth century, however, anti-positivist philosophies had been fully incorporated into a body of work that analysed Argentina's socio-historical foundations. This article examines the shift that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century in how those seeking to define race incorporated the environment into their arguments. The *raza* was commonly taken to be synonymous with nation. Selected works by sociologist and legal scholar Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918) and by writer and *ensayista* Bernardo Canal Feijóo (1897-1982) will be analysed as influential yet overlooked examples of how 'the problem of Argentine culture' could not be separated from the question of nature understood in terms of both physical and human geography. The goal will be to reveal, firstly, the extent to which the notion of the interior as geographical and anthropological desert deeply informed the political vision of the early national period in relation to race and nation and, secondly, how later interpretations of the nation recast American nature as a foundational element of cultural authenticity based on a sentiment of geographical belonging.

**Keywords:** Argentina, geography, race, nation, nationalism, environmental determinism, modernity, universalism.

This article will discuss the extent to which the belief in the ‘evil consequences [of] the Argentine [...] desert’ (Sarmiento, 1921: 25-26) underpinned national political culture throughout the twentieth century and how shifting paradigms of national identity had at their core shifting conceptions of the country’s geography. The first part of the discussion will focus on the last phase of the nation-building period. In 1913, shortly after the centenary of independence, legal scholar and sociologist Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918) gave an influential yet little known public speech which exemplifies the persistence of racial and environmental pessimism in Argentine political culture. In contrast to the prevailing literary celebrations of *criollismo* at the time, Bunge argued that the land represented an essential tool for tracing Argentina’s degenerate sociological legacy. He proposed a scientific theory of how the social and juridical institutions of the gaucho, the original dweller of the pampa, were determined by the country’s geography. Bunge was well known as the author of the treatise on the psychology of the nation, *Nuestra América* (1903), and in 1899-1900 he had been commissioned to undertake a study on European educational systems by the Ministry of Education. Based on the Lamarckian notion that organisms adapt to their environment and that such changes are inherited, Bunge’s analysis of the Argentine nation reasserted the connection between geographical and cultural emptiness.

The outbreak of the First World War and the start of Hipólito Irigoyen’s progressive government in 1916, however, marked the beginning of a new phase of cultural nationalism. Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) became an important intellectual mediator across the Southern Cone, and in particular in Argentina, facilitating the exposure of Latin American thinkers to anti-positivist philosophies, especially German phenomenology. I argue that, between the great depression of 1929 and the overthrow of Perón in 1955, discourse on the nation became inseparable from emerging critiques of

modernity's universalism. The second section of this article will focus mostly on the understudied work of writer Bernardo Canal Feijóo (1897-1982). It will be revealed how, starting from an indictment of the socio-environmental destruction of his native north-eastern province of Santiago del Estero precipitated by the export economy, Feijóo challenged the negative vision of Latin American nature arguing that a people's sense of identity should be built on a unique feeling of cultural authenticity (*autenticidad*) embedded in the community's relationship with the environment.

A long-standing tradition connecting race, nation and geography has existed in Argentine intellectual history since the onset of the liberal national project sanctioned by the 1853 constitution. Nineteenth-century social and political commentators were very vocal in expressing concerns about the racial makeup of the Argentine nation. Rooted in the idea of 'barbarity', the Argentine race was defined as the ethnic and cultural legacy of the native populations whose characteristics derived from their physical environment, according to the principles of environmental determinism. Despite this enduring racial narrative, the national mythology of Argentina's whiteness has prevailed in the historiography on race in Latin America (Graham, 2004; Wade, 1997). When Argentina is included in studies of race, it is almost exclusively in relation to the representation and assimilation of European ethnic and national groups (Domínguez, 1994; Goebel, 2014; Helg, 1990). Only more recent work has focused, for instance, on the phenomenon of *mestizaje* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Alberto, 2016).

The literature on early-twentieth-century nationalism has shown how the romanticised racial stereotype of the gaucho, who descended from both the natives and the conquistadors, was gradually introduced to enhance a literary-cum-historical sense of *argentinidad* in the face of an increasingly problematic modernity (Coletta, forthcoming 2018; Delaney, 1996; Delaney and Delaney, 2002; Prieto, 1988; Viñas, 2005). However, the founding fathers of the Argentine national project, most notably Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) and Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884), had held a deeply pessimistic view of the original conditions in which the nation was rooted. In Sarmiento's political manifesto, *Facundo, o civilización y barbarie* (1845), the notion of *raza*, already used interchangeably with *nación*, was built on the concept of barbarity, merging together cultural, social and environmental

factors. The national character was entrenched in the uncharted interior, which was seen as the inescapable origin of racial degeneracy. Alberdi's *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República de Argentina* (1852) thus presented a political case for the adoption of European and US racial and institutional models (Halperin Donghi, 1982).

The sparsely populated emptiness of the pampa was an inescapable reminder of the quasi-impossibility of building a nation: '[t]he environment establishes conditions for survival so extreme that they seem to contrive in every way against the very possibility of civilisation' (Burke and Humphrey, 2011: 135). The threat of emptiness haunted the Argentine hinterland deep into the southernmost regions of Patagonia. Charles Darwin's scientific and travel writings consolidated the mythology of Patagonia as defined by absence: nature in its utmost bareness of productive life (Nouzeilles, 1999: 35). Nineteenth-century explorers' search for wilderness still continues to be replicated more or less intact in mostly visual accounts of Patagonia as a land without people to be discovered and preserved (Peñaloza, 2010: 19-20), although the state's incorporation of Patagonia into the national territory was carried out through genocidal military campaigns (1878-1885). Geographer and historian Estanislao Zeballos's (1854-1923) explorations were crucial in legitimising an occupation plan (Arpini and Lacoste, 2002). The tenet that 'race and nation have been conjointly constructed and projected in spatial terms' (Appelbaum et al., 2003: 10) is deeply relevant to the frequently neglected Argentine case: the interior territory was thought to constitute the origin of the nation's barbarous legacy, which in turn defined its native populations.

The overwhelming preoccupation with national geography as an obstacle to civilisation contrasts greatly with the romantic concept of 'landscape' used to represent and celebrate national identities across Europe. This is most evident in those countries that had reached a high level of industrialisation by the end of the nineteenth century. The celebration of 'Englishness' and of the English countryside as the heart and soul of the nation was promoted by the tourism and motor industries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Burden and Kohl, 2006). Germany initiated nature preservation programmes in the 1880s (Lekan, 2004). Nature was increasingly subject to protection policies; it started to be included into the cultural heritage of nations (Howard and Waisbord, 2013). The United States, for example, pioneered

the concept of ‘national parks’ in the 1870s, thus extending the national civilising process to the remaining wilderness, a model that was replicated especially outside of Europe, where nature was widely domesticated (Gissibl et al., 2012).

In contrast to this, in most of postcolonial Latin America the countryside was not incorporated into national narratives as a discourse of the autochthonous until at least the first decade of the twentieth century, and not fully until the late 1920s. Mexican nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1914-1998) claimed that Latin America had not experienced a cultural process equivalent to European romanticism, and that this void was later made up for by *modernismo*’s anti-materialism as a reaction to the ultra-positivist cultural politics of turn-of-the-century nation-building (Paz, 1974: 126). The Argentine case was uniquely clear-cut: due to the dominant perception of the land as geographical and anthropological desert, the environment continued to play a central role in representations of the nation. This article will not only contribute to the literature on race and nation in Argentina, but it will also reveal original yet little-studied reappraisals of geographical narratives in Argentine political culture in relation both to the nation and more broadly to modernity as a whole.

## **A Nation without People: Geographical Desert as Political Desert in the Early Twentieth Century**

The phase of political stabilisation in Latin America in the decades following independence coincided with the rise of Comtian positivist philosophy (Davis, 1961: 188). This was followed by Charles Darwin’s theory on the origin of species and by Herbert Spencer’s social theory of evolution, which applied the notion of the ‘struggle for life’ to social phenomena. The first mention of Darwinism in Latin America seems to have been by German naturalist Conrad Burmeister (1807-1892), who lived in Argentina, in 1870, and in 1875 writer Eduardo Holmberg (1852-1936) published a novel, *Dos partidos en lucha*, about the debate over Darwin’s ideas (Glick, 1989: 58). The coexistence in Argentina of English evolutionism, French theories on the nation and, later in the century, German theories of education, resulted however in

a softer version of Darwinism, informed by the Lamarckian belief in the influence of the physical and social environment on racial heredity (Talak, 2010: 306; Coletta, forthcoming 2018).

Enlightenment philosophies, and in particular Montesquieu's theory on the effects of climate on human races, were the preexisting basis for the idea that natural and geographical factors could be used to explain different racial characteristics. It has been argued that *Facundo* should be read mainly as a product of the Enlightenment (Sorensen, 1988: 145). Sarmiento's preoccupation with the country's modernisation, emphasising the interrelationship between race, geography and nation, set the tone for the national tradition of sociological treatises on Argentina (and beyond) for a century to come. For Sarmiento, the vastness of the Argentine countryside made it impossible for the *hombre del campo* (the inhabitants of the pampa), i.e. the gaucho, to create a civilised society: 'the permanent sense of insecurity typical of the countryside impresses upon the Argentine character a kind of stoic resignation to violent death, which becomes a natural part of life' (Sarmiento, 1921: 26-27). The country's interior was described as 'the image of the sea on earth, the earth like on a map still awaiting to be given plants and all kinds of fruits to yield' (Sarmiento, 1921: 27). The impossibility of cultivating the land translated into a lack of political and economic project. The gaucho, the mestizo descendant of the natives and the Spanish settlers, had not been able to create any form of communal organisation, hence death and violence were the most common forms of social interaction (Burke and Humphrey, 2011: 136). 'In order to educate our America in freedom and industry', echoed Alberdi, 'we need to populate it with Europeans [...], as in the USA' (Alberdi, 1915: 15).

Sarmiento's later work showed a much stronger emphasis on colour-based racial hierarchies; this is especially true of his 1883 treatise *Conflictos y armonías de las razas* (Viñas, 1982). His emphasis on racial hierarchies, however, never fully replaced his hybrid vision of race as resulting from both innate and environmental factors. The persistence of his earlier approach reflected how positivism persisted alongside a variety of different anti-materialist philosophical theories. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Emile Boutroux and Henri Bergson were being circulated alongside commentaries on Comte and Spencer as well as on the work of Italian criminologist Cesare

Lombroso. The wide appeal of the new anti-materialist theories is well illustrated by the fact that José Ingenieros (1877-1925), one of the founders of psychiatry in Argentina, halted publication of his *Archivos de psiquiatría, criminología y medicina legal* (1902-1913) and launched in its place the *Revista de Filosofía* (1915-1929), where he created a space for these new theoretical concerns (Ardissonne, Biagini and Sassi: 1984).

In his introduction to a new edition of Carlos Octavio Bunge's 1903 sociological treatise *Nuestra América*, Ingenieros critiqued Bunge's exaggerated emphasis on *los factores étnicos* (ethnic features) of race and claimed instead a much greater influence of external factors, especially the physical environment (Bunge, 1918: 18). In his well-known essay, Bunge traced an aetiology of political *caudillismo* back to the mixing of three races: Spaniards, *indios* and *negros*. For Bunge, the miscegenation that had resulted in the *criollo* race was what determined the main attributes of the Argentine nation. The native and black elements were described as fundamentally degenerate, but Bunge mostly analysed the psychology of the Spaniards and their 'arrogance', arguing that the combination of the different hereditary traits determined the psychology of the *criollo*, reflected in the violent nature of both national and regional politics. As regards the character of the Argentine people, Bunge stressed the contrast between the *tierra adentro* (the interior) and the *litoral* (the coast), recommending that the latter should replace the former in determining the nation's character thanks to immigration.

Bunge gave his speech 'El derecho en la literatura gauchesca' ('Law in gauchesca literature') at the Academia de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires in August 1913, at the height of literary *criollismo* and the *gauchesca*. For example, in that same year, Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938) sanctioned the literary myth of the gaucho in a series of lectures on José Hernández's classic poem *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879), which were published three years later as *El payador* (Huberman, 2001: 18). At the same time, intellectuals such as Ricardo Rojas (1882-1957) and Manuel Gálvez (1882-1962) cemented this anti-cosmopolitan narrative in a new vision of the land and its indigenous inhabitants as a source of spiritual and cultural energy. Works like Rojas's *Blasón de Plata* (1910) are an example of *telurismo* ('tellurism'), a new conception of the land as a spiritual source of collective life.



At the same time as the cultural nationalists were creating their literary mythology, then, Bunge set out to describe the racial origin of the gaucho 'with scientific method' (Bunge, 1913: 4). Since the gaucho was about to disappear from Argentine society due to the socio-economic changes caused by European immigration to rural areas, it was necessary to establish the full pedigree of the first Argentine racial type. His short treatise shows that for Bunge, as well as for other contemporary commentators, the notion of race continued to be heavily dependent on external factors: the physical environment of the pampa determined both the individual and social features of the national archetype. Echoing Sarmiento, the text fully reveals the pessimistic cause-effect connection that persisted between Argentina's geography and the racial characteristics of its people, with an emphasis on the country's political culture and institutions.

'First and foremost', argued Bunge, 'in order to understand [the gaucho's] customs, art, morals, in brief his soul, we must consider his race and his geographical and economic environment' (Bunge, 1913: 4). The Spaniards, who had to face the first 'unfortunate encounter' with the 'repulsive blood' of the indigenous peoples (Bunge, 1913: 6) of the interior plains, were described as having 'relatively pure blood, with their Andalusian smile and Castilian gaze' (Bunge, 1913: 6). This initial description contrasts starkly with the arrogance, laziness and ferocity that Bunge had attributed to the Spanish psychology in *Nuestra América*; while race mixing was still condemned as 'unfortunate', now Bunge saw in the Spanish heritage an element of racial improvement. Not to be confused with the barbarous indigenous 'settlers of the interior', the gaucho population was superior to the rest of the 'aborigines due to its race, soul and climate', as it inhabited the most favourable regions (Bunge, 1913: 7).

The male gaucho's physical prowess is described in detail, while his nervous temperament is said to respond to his lifestyle and carnivorous eating habits. The most common way of characterising the land in which the gaucho lived is still through the ideas of vastness and solitude. The gaucho was not subjected to any authority; instead, he had learned to rely on his senses and his intuition, rather than on his rational intellect, for his survival (Bunge, 1913: 7-8). While Bunge expressed a fascination with the gaucho's contemplative attitude and sense of religious awe in the face of an indomitable nature (Bunge, 1913: 9), he was able to indulge in this vision of the gaucho's imagination and creativity because this racial

archetype, as he repeatedly stated, had almost entirely disappeared from Argentina's social body. During the nineteenth century, the gaucho population was gradually displaced. The Argentine gauchos never adapted to the transition from cattle raising to agriculture; even when they tried to turn to agriculture, the government favoured European colonists so the gauchos started to be employed almost exclusively as farmhands or peons on the huge *estancias* which had resulted from the *alambramientos* (barbed wire enclosures) (Solberg, 1987: 83-85). Throughout the last third of the century, the transition from gaucho to peon was completed. Bunge reiterated the idea that the gaucho's social weakness resided in his individualism, which made it impossible for him to create any socio-political organisation; this led to his historical demise and his literary rehabilitation as Argentina's symbolic archetype.

Bunge's treatise was one among several early-twentieth-century works celebrating the social death of the gaucho and his literary rebirth (Coletta, forthcoming 2018). However, unlike most other writings on this topic, Bunge's short analysis focused more than anything else on the socio-political legacy of the pampa and its notorious dweller. As the title suggests, the author's interest lies in establishing why the gaucho was unable to develop social and political institutions. Bunge claimed that '[t]he gaucho lacked juridical institutions since the State could neither be established nor sustained in the desert' (Bunge, 1913: 23). The *gaucho malo*, the outlaw cowboy epitomised by Juan Moreira (Prieto, 1988), was not a literary myth, stated Bunge, but rather a proven historical fact (Bunge, 1913: 22-23). The unmeasurable geography of the interior plains was therefore the single most important component of the gaucho *mestizo* race in determining its political, social and economic organisation. In the absence of a written law, the strongly rooted individualism of the gaucho race resulted in the application of a very primitive kind of customary law, based on the right to vengeance and with no notion of private property (Bunge, 1913: 12). According to Bunge, an inability to adapt to the rule of law had caused the gaucho's historical and social demise; his survival as a national literary archetype, however, was the symbolic legacy of the first nucleus of the Argentine race.

Carlos Octavio Bunge's concern with the creation of modern institutions and Argentina's inclusion in the race for progress as a modern nation was already clear from his previous works such as *Teoría del*

*derecho* (1905), tellingly translated into French with the title *Le droit c'est la force*. His positivist liberalism and his belief in the survival of the fittest was further sustained by the vitalist philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner (Terán, 1987: 44). The weaker races, who were a product of the land and therefore not apt for progress, would perish because they were excluded from the nation: after serving heroically to defend the country from the threat of foreign invasions, they had been unable to adapt to the new economy (Bunge, 1913: 12-15). The modern political and economic institutions in the rest of Argentina, away from the interior, would guarantee juridical stability. Whereas Sarmiento's historical determinism was rooted in Enlightenment ideas, Bunge upheld the deterministic force of the environment through the Spencerian belief in the gradual disappearance of the weaker races (Talak, 2010).

The liberalism of late-nineteenth-century Argentina was based on racial notions due to the failure to create a fully Europeanised society free from the ghost of *mestizaje* (Nouzeilles, 2000: 18-20). While this is true, as the analysis of Bunge's work further shows, it is equally important to emphasise that the turn-of-the-century notion of race was assimilated into that of nation in a broad sense. The term *raza* included historical factors such as colonialism and, above all, environmental factors. Other influential social analysts of the time, such as Lucas Ayarragaray (1861-1944), focused on the violent anarchical character of Argentine politics, attributed to the impossibility of establishing permanent settlements - and therefore an economy based on the rule of law and commercial exchange - in such a vast and ungovernable territory (Ayarragaray, 1904: 70, 81). In declaring the social death of the *mestizo* inhabitants of the pampa, Bunge was also stating, then, that the national government had established a new order which radiated from the urban political centre towards the rest of the country. Here, the new immigrant settlers founded villages and expelled anyone who did not have a legal title of ownership (Bunge, 1913: 13). This was a result of the government's immigration policies favouring the European settlers over the aborigines.

The hostile solitude of the empty pampa continued to be a topos in Argentine literary and sociological criticism. Above all else, the image of the emptiness of the interior was compared with the civilising force of Buenos Aires, as in one of the best known *ensayos* on the nation of the early twentieth century: *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933) by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (1895-1964). It is less well

known, however, that a decade later Martínez Estrada published another critical work, *La cabeza de Goliat* (1944), in which the monstrosity of the city of Buenos Aires was described as the degenerate outcome of the ‘architects of urban opulence [who] believed in the endless expansion of its grandiosity’ (Martínez Estrada, 2001: 23). All the nation’s capital had been poured into the city for the exclusive benefit of those who lived within its socio-economic boundaries (Martínez Estrada, 2001: 34), while the constant activity characterising the city was now described by Martínez Estrada as a state of *inquietud* (2001: 37). Such a state of anxiety was said to have taken over the city, the original site of order and control, as a new form of barbarity: it was in stark contrast with the rational organisation of the urban political centre originally imagined by Sarmiento and the other intellectuals of his generation. The European civilisational model was losing its absolute supremacy, and critics such as Santiago del Estero-born Bernardo Canal Feijóo would condemn the idea of geographical and historical emptiness as the political and sociological foundation of Argentina’s national narrative. In his work of the early 1950s, Feijóo turned the negative notion of the desert, which had been at the basis of the nineteenth-century liberal project, on its head, proposing instead a symbiotic relationship between the people and the land as the principal source of cultural authenticity.

## **A Critique of the Modern Nation: Anti-universalism and Geographical Authenticity in the Mid Twentieth Century**

While in Mexico or Bolivia, home to great ancient civilisations, titles such as *La raza cósmica* and *Raza de bronce* were published, it was no surprise, argued Bernardo Canal Feijóo (2007: 105), that Argentine books on the nation included *Radiografía de la pampa*. This was due to the fact that Argentina’s national narrative originated from a failure to recognise the country’s past cultures and its land (Feijóo. 2007: 106). By contrast, Feijóo analysed the ‘problem of the nation’ by contesting the civilisational model that had been at the core of Argentine culture and politics from the outset of independence. This section examines the ways in which Feijóo criticised the principle of universalism inscribed in the country’s

constitutional, economic and cultural models, claiming instead that national culture was deeply connected with its physical environment. He had been unconvinced by the early nationalist efforts of Ricardo Rojas or Leopoldo Lugones to establish a national narrative that omitted what he saw as the country's rich diversity (Corvalán, 1988: 16). Rojas's essay *Eurindia* (1925) argued that there had been a synthesis between the European and the indigenous legacies that was unique to the geographical, historical and linguistic locus of the American continent. Like his contemporary Ricardo Güiraldes, Rojas's *telurismo* emphasised the significance of the land in shaping culture (Viñas, 2005: 57-59); however, their focus continued to be the economically, politically and intellectually outward-looking city of Buenos Aires.

Born, like Rojas, in Santiago del Estero, Feijóo observed Argentina's struggle to become a modern nation from the ecological and cultural locus of the north-east. This makes the analysis of his work especially compelling and urgent: Feijóo's life in Santiago coincided with the climax and decline of the agroforestry business in the decades from the 1890s to the 1940s (Martínez, 1992: 510). His award-winning *Ensayo sobre la expresión popular y artística en Santiago* (1937) responded to the consequences of several decades of wood, charcoal and leather production, mostly destined for the foreign-dominated railway industry and the export market. This had led to the deforestation of the quebracho forests of the north and north-east and to an unprecedented drought pushing many of its residents to leave for the bigger urban centres, especially Buenos Aires (Andermann, 2010). He contended that, ever since the conquistadors had come across nomadic peoples, national historians and sociologists had believed that the native inhabitants were 'people without history' and identified the foundations of national history with the 'absorption of [European] culture' (Corvalán, 1988: 147-149).

*Confines de Occidente*, which Feijóo dedicated to his mentor and friend Francisco Romero (1891-1962), one of the most influential twentieth-century Argentine philosophers and partisan of German phenomenology, was an expanded version of a previous reflection from about ten years earlier on the issue of 'Argentine national culture' (Feijóo, 2007: 13). Should one talk about culture in the singular or rather about different cultures that were chronologically, geographically and ethnologically specific (Feijóo, 2007: 18)? The Spenglerian notion of culture was validated by the philosophical critiques of

universalism coming from existentialism and phenomenology: the idea that culture ‘radiated’ from a single centre ‘according to the Enlightenment notion’, wrote Feijóo, was intended to assert power upon local resources, cultures, histories and forms of knowledge (Feijóo, 2007: 19).

German critic Oswald Spengler’s well-known work *The Decline of the West* (1918) rejected the notion of a universal civilisation, stressing instead a range of historically and spatially differentiated cultures. It had been disseminated very quickly in Argentina thanks to its translation, with commentaries, by historian and sociologist Ernesto Quesada (1858-1934) (Carreras, 2008). In the same period a number of contemporary German thinkers including Georg Simmel, Ernst Jung and Max Scheler published in the highly influential *Revista de Occidente*, founded in 1923 by Ortega y Gasset after the end of his six-year stay in Argentina (Medin, 1994: 8, 39). This engendered a strong and long-lasting critique of positivism especially from the new German school of phenomenology (de Oliveira, 2010: 157). The period from 1929 - coinciding with the global economic crash, the military coup that ended Yrigoyen’s second presidency and a second visit by Ortega y Gasset to Argentina - to the year 1955 - which marked the start of a military regime and the decline of the *Revista de Occidente* following Ortega’s death - was bursting with intellectual change (Gramuglio, 2010; Medin, 1994). In 1930 the journal *Sur* was launched in Buenos Aires by Victoria Ocampo (1880-1979) with the collaboration of Ortega y Gasset (King, 1989). The most prominent voices of Argentine culture wrote in the magazine, including Bernardo Canal Feijóo.

Unlike most of the close intellectual circle involved in the *Sur* project, such as Eduardo Mallea, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges, Feijóo was not based in Buenos Aires but continued to live in the old town of Santiago del Estero. In Santiago he founded and directed the cultural association *La Brasa* from 1925; it survived until Feijóo left for Buenos Aires in 1947 (Corvalán, 1988: 21). Through the *Sur* network, he was able to bring to his native Santiago, among others, Waldo Frank and Count Hermann Keyserling, who had been invited to Argentina by Victoria Ocampo (Kaminsky, 2008); their critiques of modern civilisation were instrumental for Feijóo’s work on Argentine culture. Both *Sur* and the *Revista de Occidente*, with the related series *Biblioteca de Ideas del Siglo XX*, promoted a number of works critiquing the principle of universality including work by Bergson, Simmel, Spengler, Keyserling,

Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, Russell and many others.

Following the phenomenological notion that life is embedded in circumstance, then, Feijóo argued that ‘culture is the occurrence of the spirit’s fulfilment in a given reality’ (Feijóo, 2007: 25). While the Enlightenment’s centrifugal movement presupposes the desert, i.e. a human vacuum upon which universal reason can be imposed, the non-European geography of South America was in fact already inhabited. The notion that culture stems from an ‘original locus’ is connected to conquest, colonisation and imperialism (Feijóo, 2007: 20). For Feijóo, the image of the desert (*el desierto*) to describe the Argentine interior plains and the southern regions of Patagonia implied a moral judgment. The geographical desert was translated into moral and cultural emptiness: ‘a very original notion of the desert – that is, the land occupied by Spanish colonial history, or by the Indians, and yet empty’ (Feijóo, 2007: 72). Juan Bautista Alberdi’s famous mid-nineteenth-century motto *en América gobernar es poblar* (in America to govern is to populate) reflected the philosophical and political vision that ‘the land is the evil that looms over America’ (Feijóo, 2007: 72). The ‘problem of culture’ could not, then, be separated from the question of nature understood in terms of both physical and human geography. This overwhelming determinism resulted, according to Feijóo, in a generalised desire to exclude nature from the national imagination by identifying it with the topos of barbarism. Had there ever been a foundational cultural movement such as romanticism in Argentina, Feijóo wrote (2007: 76), the *paisaje*, the landscape, had been left out of it. This ‘aesthetic omission’ had resulted in turn in an ‘anti-telluric philosophy’, that is a way of thinking that separated national culture from its geographical roots (Feijóo, 2007: 77).

The nation was therefore founded on universalistic premises; Feijóo saw the attitude of the founding fathers, Alberdi and Sarmiento, as looking towards Europe, and the process of independence as characterised by ‘an opposition between ‘continental’ politics and ‘Europeanist’ politics: the former was full of uncertainty, while the latter had the irresistible prestige of culture and power’ (Feijóo, 2007: 92). After independence, in pursuit of the ideal of the nation, Latin Americans discarded the ‘local’ value of culture and missed out on the opportunity to assert their own authenticity. The revolution and the constitution, claimed Feijóo provocatively (2007: 88), ‘could be defined as a “European”, rather than an

American, achievement'. The 'constitutional ideal' was imbued with an absolute concept of history, which in turn implied the 'dogmas of the desert and racial inferiority' (Feijóo, 2007: 113). He also asserted that Alberdi, 'the greatest Argentine constitutional law scholar', had used certain colonial psychological features, such as feelings of guilt and inferiority, to support his universalistic constitutional ideal (Feijóo, 2007: 99). Two interconnected issues thus stand out in Feijóo's critique of Argentina's national discourse: the subjugation to universalism implicit in the assumption of universal history and the concept of *barbarie* linking *raza* and *naturaleza* (Feijóo, 2007: 120).

Having been relegated to the geographical borders of history, Latin America had to become a historical subject at a stroke: the model of the nation-state made that possible. Feijóo described very clearly in *Confines* how, following Hegelian dialectics, the human spirit expanded from its European centre through its power to dominate nature. In this Hegelian reading, nature was the negative pole to culture: 'in the dialectics of the national destiny, nature has always been an overwhelming presence' (Feijóo, 2007: 71). Hence the notion that the desert needed to be contained lest it ended up 'asphyxiating' the country altogether (Feijóo, 2007: 72). For Feijóo this notion came from Hegel's philosophy of history, whereby the history of civilisation is 'a single expansive process [...] that would reach all peoples [...] and wake them up to historical existence' (Feijóo, 2007: 87-88).<sup>3</sup> This contrast between a lack of history outside of Europe and a universal reason epitomised by western European philosophy has been analysed in the following terms: '[t]he *anthropos* inhabiting non-European places discovered that s/he had been invented, as *anthropos*, by a locus of enunciation self-defined as *humanitas*' (Mignolo, 2009: 11).

In *Confines*, Feijóo reconnected history to geography. Firstly, he celebrated the *mestizidad*, the mixing of races, that had occurred in Argentina (and in Latin America as a whole) as an original 'synthesis' which resulted in something 'new, dynamic and productive' (Feijóo, 2007: 63). While for Bunge the Spaniards' 'relative purity of blood' had slightly bettered the indigenous races according to the principle of miscegenation (Bunge, 1913: 6), Feijóo celebrated the *espíritu mestizo* (the mestizo spirit)

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<sup>3</sup> In 1928, Ortega y Gasset had translated Hegel's *Philosophy of World History* into Spanish, adding a critical introduction on the issue of universal history and the new world (1963).



which had been wrongly seen as a disharmonious ‘composite mixture’ or the ‘domination of the stronger over the weaker’ (Feijóo, 2007: 63). For instance, Feijóo criticised the fact that the indigenous was omitted from the national archetype of the *criollo* or the gaucho: ‘a truthful characterisation of the gaucho would show how his features derive as much from the Indian [...] as from the Spaniard’ (Feijóo, 2007: 69). Throughout national sociology, however, the legacy of the ‘Indian’ was recognised even less than that of the numerically far less significant black population (Feijóo, 2007: 69).

Since the anti-positivist philosophical climate had started to enter the University of Buenos Aires from 1916 onwards, the belief in the degenerative consequences of miscegenation was much weaker. In 1918, on the *Día de la Raza* (‘Day of the Race’), the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Rodolfo Rivarola (1857-1942), gave a talk, dedicated among others to Ortega y Gasset, in which he asked his audience whether ‘race actually existed’, stating that ‘we all clearly come from race mixing’ (Rivarola, 1918: 13; Medin, 1994: 18; Neiburg and Plotkin, 2004: 56). This would become the dominant view in later decades and among Feijóo’s contemporaries. Philosopher Carlos Astrada (1894-1970), for instance, celebrated the ‘hybridisation’ that ‘the white man, the black man and the gaucho’ had gone through in America, a process determined equally by biological and environmental factors (Astrada, 1972: 4-5). For Astrada, the American environment had a power of ‘magical seduction’, the effects of which on the inhabitants of the pampa had been accurately observed by Charles Darwin (Astrada, 1972: 48): the ‘loneliness of the plains’ and the extraordinary power of the American continent to assimilate heterogeneous peoples (Astrada, 1972: 49, 52).

Like Astrada, Feijóo was a keen reader of German phenomenologists (de Oliveira, 2010: 160-61). He was particularly taken by Scheler’s work on ethics and sympathy published in Buenos Aires as *Esencia y forma de la simpatía* (1943). Scheler argued that there was an instinctive tendency to feel the other that preceded any rational moral system and that it was not the logic of domination of the world that kept humans together but rather a feeling of mutual love and reverence for the world. Unlike Astrada, however, Feijóo did not see the land (*la tierra*) as simply determining racial and anthropological features; the land for Feijóo was at the core of a system of relations that he described as *existencia localizada*

(located existence), which ‘implies as its basis a relationship of place [...], and by place I mean the sum of things and beings, both zoological and human, as well as of concrete internal relations which compose the community’s historical picture’ (Feijóo, 2007: 65). It was necessary to celebrate the relationship between the great American races and the land to fill in the historical and sociological void that still separated Argentina from other Latin American countries (Feijóo, 2007: 106-108).

Feijóo emphasised the extent to which the early-sixteenth-century idea of conquering an empty territory still affected imaginaries of South America in the national period. This is why, to avoid ‘abstract universalisms’, he advocated *regionalismo* (regionalism), a form as well as a feeling of locatedness deriving from the interrelation between history and geography (Feijóo, 2007: 134). He spoke of culture as ‘existing’ in a ‘lived reality’, where ‘geographical emotion’ would help create a sense of ‘solidarity within the community’ (Feijóo, 2007: 133-34). Latin America would not find its own essence unless it accepted its geo-cultural uniqueness: ‘the problem of American culture boils down to the problem of essentially knowing oneself. [...] Culturally, [Latin] Americans have not succeeded in *being* where they *are situated* and have failed to take on the awareness - and responsibility - of their own locatedness’ (Feijóo, 2007: 34).<sup>4</sup> The final pages of the book are dedicated to the linguistic and philosophical difference between *ser* (to be) and *estar* (to be situated) as marking a fundamental shift from the imperialistic universalism of the independence process to the geographical authenticity that Argentina still needed to achieve.

## Conclusion

Nationhood is constructed through institutions as much as through collective imaginings; this becomes more apparent when looking at the formation of new nations in post-colonial regions, which is rarely considered (Dunkerley, 2002: 2). Here new national narratives need to deal with an inheritance of

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Culturalmente, el americano no acaba de *ser* donde *está*, y asumir totalmente la conciencia - y la responsabilidad - de su situación’. The Spanish *situación* also conjures the Orteguian notion of circumstance derived from phenomenology, but the idea of physical location is much weightier here.

annihilation and domination, both material and symbolic. As the spirit of nations was considered at the time to be dependent on the historical and cultural advancement of their peoples, racial notions were at the core of the literature on nationhood. In Latin America, *raza* and *nación* have commonly been used as synonyms: race comprised notions of material, cultural, historical and environmental inheritance. As nation states were created after independence, human topographies were functional to defining the national soul. Argentina, unlike other regions of the former empire such as Mexico and Peru, lacked a colonial discourse on race, such that racial stereotypes were created alongside the territorial boundaries that defined the confines of civilisation. Argentina poses an exemplary case of how race was created ad hoc for the nation.

The founding national narratives perpetuated the notion of barbarity, which encompassed both the people and the geography of the country. Carlos Octavio Bunge's short treatise of 1913 on the juridical consequences of gaucho culture, which would continue to be celebrated in literary and visual imaginations about knife fighters and outlaws, shows the discursive centrality of racial features for achieving national modernity. Those founding national mythologies are still at the core of how Argentines imagine their national selves (Gamerro, 2015). Bernardo Canal Feijóo's critique of this denial of authenticity in such accounts of emptiness and barbarity concerned the extent to which the founding fathers had sacrificed local and regional culture to what they considered to be their most urgent objective: forming a modern nation. Feijóo argued instead for a rehabilitation of Argentina's hybridity and diversity, and in so doing he criticised the aspiration to global modernity promoted as the country's only claim to be part of the modern world.

Forms of environmental racism have recently been identified, for instance, in migration studies (Ramírez-Dhoore, 2010: 177); by considering these different ways in which post-colonial nations have been built on geo-racial factors it may be possible to further widen our understanding of ideas of state, citizenship, land and ethnicity in the modern nation. Recent works on, for example, violence and the state (Franco, 2013), or social and environmental movements and territorial rights in Latin America (Escobar, 2008), indicate the importance of rethinking the nation from its margins. In Feijóo's critical view, these

marginalities derived from the universalist notion that the Latin American historical locus existed on the fringes of the west. From this hybrid position on the border between the modern and the premodern, Feijóo re-evaluated the significance of the physical environment. In subsequent decades this vision has been taken on by Argentine and Latin American environmental philosophers and political theorists alike who claim that space must be taken as seriously as time, not in the sense of ‘geographical determinism, but of exchanges between place and community’ (Auat, 2016).

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